

Housing Benefit Direct.....

April 2009

Issue 88

Editorial

As we go into the new financial year, the main priority for all of us is of course to provide quick and effective help to those customers who are claiming benefits, often for the first time, as a result of the economic downturn. As well as doing this, we also need to maintain and enhance the service we give to all our customers. So quite a challenge!



I do hope that the additional funding we have made available to you will be a positive help. We will keep the situation under review and make the case for more resources if volumes of claims grow faster than anticipated. To help with this we do need to ensure that we get as much information as we possibly can and this will now come from the Single Housing Benefit Extract (SHBE).

Making sure that SHBE is as comprehensive and accurate as possible has to be key to this. We will also look at any ideas for changes to processes which could make life easier. We have begun to do this already: following one suggestion we have recently issued revised guidance on superseding HB/CTB awards (*Circular A6/2009*) and we hope to say more about other changes soon. Keep the ideas flowing, preferably through your local authority associations, so that we don't miss anything really useful. And we will of course continue to work on improvements to the flow of information between us, principally by moving to more secure and efficient electronic transfers.

I am delighted that we have got to the point of piloting the new e-transfer arrangements for transferring claims information from DWP agencies over to you. I still get a bit baffled when I hear people talk about LAIDs and LACIs but I am assured you will know exactly what these mean! And we have the roll-out of the In and Out of Work Project underway which will bring a more efficient way of working between DWP, HMRC and you, removing some of the barriers people face when taking up a job. All these improvements are underpinned by Government Connect and I am pleased with the real progress we are now seeing on getting everyone compliant.

Finally, we are all busy here taking forward work from the Housing Benefit Review, and I hope to say more about this next time. We still don't know when the consultation will begin or exactly what form it will take but watch this space! Best wishes.

Paul Howarth, Head of Housing Benefit Strategy Division
 Email: [✉ Paul.Howarth@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:Paul.Howarth@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)

HBDMS has changed!

Housing Benefit Data Matching Service (HBDMS) has been renamed Housing Benefit Information Delivery (HBID). HBID encompasses Housing Benefit Matching Service (HBMS) based at Peel Park and Housing Benefit Data Services (HBDS) based in Newcastle. The main benefit of this is that your SHBE data will be dealt with by one team.

Performance Analysis Team (PAT) has been merged into the production area of HBMS. A new dedicated Communications Team has been established which aims to bring closer working relations between HBID and yourselves.

All LAs should now have received a revised contact list for HBID. Please contact us if you have not.

Any questions or queries please e-mail us on [✉ peelpark.ifdhbidcomms@dwp.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:peelpark.ifdhbidcomms@dwp.gsi.gov.uk)
 Otherwise contact Paul Cusworth on [☎ 01253 688525](tel:01253688525) or Leanne Barrot on [☎ 01253 688487](tel:01253688487).

DWP Department for
Work and Pensions

Self-Employment Credit

In January this year the Prime Minister announced the introduction of a new Self-Employment Offer from 6 April 2009 as part of the Government's '6 month offer' for unemployed people. It will be open to those who have been on Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) for at least six months and are interested in moving into self-employment.

The Self-Employment Offer incorporates

- a basic or intensive programme of practical advice and training support for people interested in moving into self-employment, depending on the level of need
- in-work mentoring and support for people who require it in the early months of trading, and
- a new financial incentive, **the Self-Employment Credit** to support that transition as the person moves off JSA and begins trading

In order for a person to be entitled to receive the Self-Employment Credit they will need to

- end their claim to JSA by moving into self-employed work of 16 hours or more
- provide information on the self-employed work they are to undertake
- show that the work will last at least five weeks
- register with HMRC as self-employed, and
- not be claiming any other credit payments

The Self-Employment Credit will be a weekly payment and is likely to last for the first few months of trading. Further details of the amount and duration will become available in our April circular. The Self-Employment Credit will be an extension of the existing Return to Work Credit and will be paid under section 2 of the Employment and Training Act 1973. It will therefore be wholly disregarded for HB/CTB purposes under *Schedule 5, Paragraph 13 of The Housing Benefit Regulations 2006* and *Schedule 4, Paragraph 14 of The Council Tax Benefit Regulations 2006*.

If you have any questions regarding this measure please contact 📧 richard.metcalfe@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Paying HB to tenants in temporary accommodation

You may have already heard that we are planning to develop trials to test the impact of making direct Housing Benefit (HB) payments to customers living in temporary accommodation. A number of local authorities (LAs) have already registered their interest in discussing these trials in more detail with a view to participating but we would like to hear from any other authorities who may wish to come on board.

The broad aims of the trials are to see whether direct payments could help to improve budgeting skills among customers in temporary accommodation and perhaps make them more ready to consider a move into the private rented sector as well as employment. We plan to test



different approaches in a controlled way to enable us to safely weigh up the various risks against the potential benefits of direct payments. We want to target customers who are placed in leased temporary accommodation and who are likely to be there for some time (several years perhaps). For that reason we are particularly interested in hearing from any London borough that has not already expressed an interest in taking part in the trials.

We should emphasise that there are no plans to implement compulsory direct HB payments to all customers in temporary accommodation at a national level without a full evaluation of these trials. Greater numbers of volunteers to trial these processes will enable us to test a wider range of approaches, which is likely to result in a more comprehensive evaluation. So if you are interested in participating, without commitment at this stage, to help us identify the possible outcomes of direct payments please contact us at the email address given below.

📧 joseph.stacey@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

SHBE update

We are pleased to confirm that 99% of LAs are now successfully loading SHBE data with HBID and we are on target to decommission the HBMS extract in April 2009. This supports the DWP Information Directorate's aim to reduce the burden of data provision on LAs.

A sub-extract, derived from your SHBE is now being delivered to HBMS for data quality analysis. We are contacting LAs individually to inform them when their SHBE is being used for HBMS data matching and a separate HBMS extract is no longer required.

Important information relating to the use of your SHBE for HBMS matching will be sent to your designated Responsible Encryptor (RE). Please ensure this information is cascaded to the relevant personnel within your authority.

The HBMS Data Integrity Team (DIT) is also issuing SHBE data quality reports to your RE following each data matching exercise. Please do not hesitate to contact the team for advice or assistance in resolving issues.

📧 IFDDMS.HBMSDIT@DWP.GSI.GOV.UK



Need an answer? Post your questions and suggestions to HB-Policy-FAQ@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

In and Out of Work gathers momentum...

In November's edition we brought you news on the rollout of new In and Out of Work processes across England, Scotland and Wales. The processes were developed from pilots run between Jobcentre Plus, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and LAs.

The processes streamline the way benefits and credits are paid to people moving in and out of work, by providing one point of contact (Jobcentre Plus) for customers to access their entitlements. The number of LAs coming on board since rollout commenced have increased at a promising rate.

The new processes have continued to prove popular, Gordon Walker the HB Manager at Guildford Borough Council says

'Once our staff understood what was involved, and what benefits the new processes would bring, they were very receptive about introducing the change. And it's not just a change in process, there is a change in emphasis because LA staff no longer, in many cases, need to gather information to verify Housing and Council Tax benefits, Jobcentre Plus do this on their behalf. I am really pleased with the way the new processes are embedding into our benefit services, and the quality of information we are receiving from Jobcentre Plus means we are further improving the time it takes to process claims'.

Laura Leicester, Benefits Manager from the Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk also praised the implementation of In and Out of Work in her authority

'Our staff were involved right from the outset, and worked closely with colleagues from Jobcentre Plus which helped everybody get a much clearer understanding of each other's roles. This approach also helped staff to understand why we wanted to implement the new processes, and what's in it for them and customers. We could see that the new processes would improve efficiency, and at the same time offer a much better service to our customers. We have already seen significant improvements in processing times'.

Jobcentre Plus Regional Implementation Managers are working closely with LAs to help up-skill staff and bring more and more areas on board. The plan is to complete implementation by the end of the year.

More information can be found on the DWP website by searching for *In and Out of Work*, or contact the project at [✉ IOW@JOBCENTREPLUS.GSI.GOV.UK](mailto:IOW@JOBCENTREPLUS.GSI.GOV.UK)



Online Benefits Adviser service



As part of DWP's commitment to improving the access customers have to its services, the Department has developed the online Benefits Adviser service.

Available through the Directgov website, the Benefits Adviser provides customers with information and entitlement advice on 28 benefits, pensions and credits. By answering some straightforward questions about their circumstances, customers can find out which benefits they may be entitled to and information on how to claim – something that's particularly useful during the current economic downturn.

The Benefits Adviser also links users to other services already on the internet, such as online claim services, a jobsearch facility and state pension forecasting. It can be used by trusted intermediaries too, meaning those customers who might not be able to access the internet themselves can still benefit from the service.

In September this year the service will be enhanced with the addition of a calculation and comparison tool that will show customers how much benefit they could be entitled to. In addition to this it will provide them with the opportunity to input potential circumstances to see how this would affect their benefit, for example, if they would be better off in work.

Benefits Adviser is something that many of our customers have told us they want, and indeed, it has been developed with customer needs in mind. Customers value the ability to use a familiar channel to find out helpful information whenever and wherever it suits them. However, this doesn't mean the Benefits Adviser is replacing any of our other existing contact channels – it's actually an alternative service that offers customers an extra choice when obtaining information from DWP.

Take a look at the service for yourself on the Directgov website

http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Dio1/DoltOnline/DoltOnlineByCategory/DG_073267, where you can also leave any feedback on the service.

Electronic transfer of HB/CTB claim data to LAs (e-Transfer Project)

We are pleased to be able to tell you that the e-Transfer Project pilot is now up and running. This started on 9 March 2009.



This means that eight LAs are now successfully receiving HB and CTB claim information in a secure electronic format. The electronic Local Authority Input Document (LAID), which is received the day after it is sent by DWP, comes in Portable Document Format (PDF). This can be printed off or downloaded into document management systems (DMS) as required.

After evaluating the pilots, we plan to start national rollout of e-Transfer in May 2009. Before going-live with the new process you need to have a secure CoCo compliant GCSx or GSx connection. This will be managed by our colleagues in Government Connect, who will also arrange for the installation of a new file server to receive files containing the electronic LAIDs.

National rollout will start with those LAs who already have the necessary end-to-end connections. The rollout schedule will follow GCSx connectivity and will continue until October 2009.

Each LA has provided the project with a designated single point of contact, and we will be liaising closely with them prior to rollout to ensure that all the necessary steps have been taken to guarantee a successful go-live.

If you have any queries please contact us on QH.HBInfoFlowsProgramme@DWP.GSI.GOV.UK

Changes to LHA rates for properties consisting of six or more bedrooms

I am sure you are all ready for the introduction of the changes to the way we calculate HB under Local Housing Allowance (LHA) for properties consisting of six or more bedrooms. The regulations come in to force on 6 April 2009. This means that no new customers will be able to receive HB rates for six or more bedrooms under the LHA scheme. Existing LHA customers already in receipt of benefit for six or more bedrooms will be protected for a maximum of 26 weeks after the date of their review. If there is a change in address, or a change in the household composition or any other change in their circumstances that affects the category of the dwelling the claim will be reviewed and re-assessed under the amended regulations.



As there are such a small proportion of tenants in properties consisting of six or more bedrooms, the level of communication with various organisations will vary for each LA, however we strongly recommend that you communicate with your stakeholders about this change, in particular the landlords, welfare rights organisations and individual customers that are likely to be affected.

To support you in delivering this change we have produced templates, draft letters and leaflets and we have also amended the LHA Guidance Manual. You should receive the amendments shortly if you have not already received your copies yet. We have already sent an email to all Benefit Managers detailing the changes and listing the following products that you can also download using the following link

www.dwp.gov.uk/housingbenefit/claims-processing/lha/communications.asp

- Task sheet - LHA for large properties consisting of six or more bedrooms
- LHA Rent Levels – LA Logo
- LHA33 – suggested letter text for existing tenants in large properties consisting of six or more bedrooms. This is to let customers know in advance that their benefit may be changing
- LHA 29 – suggested letter for existing tenants claiming HB for six or more bedrooms (to be attached to LHA 33). This is for use when you are aware of the specific change that affects individual customers
- LHA 13a - new leaflet: Information for private landlords
- LHA 21 – new leaflet: Information specifically targeted at new and existing tenants claiming and receiving HB under LHA for large properties (six or more bedrooms)
- HB(LHA)1a – new leaflet: Information for new claimants

All the above templates and leaflets can be adapted to suit your individual needs. We will also continue with our LHA communications for at least the next couple of months both here in HB Direct and in General Information Bulletins – if there are any specific areas you feel would be useful then please let us know and we will do our best to publish further advice.

kish.nathwani@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

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